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Washington: The President Decides

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 1—The power of the President to do what he likes on questions of war or peace has seldom been dramatized more sharply than in Mr. Johnson's conduct of the Vietnam war.

He has done almost everything in Vietnam he vowed publicly not to do. He has done it all legally, and in the process he has demonstrated that the American President now exercises personal power in the field of foreign affairs unequaled by any other political leader in the world.

He was against taking the Vietnam issue to the United Nations Security Council for judgment, but he presented it to the U.N. this week nevertheless. He opposed bombing North Vietnam when he ran for the Presidency, but he ordered the bombing after he was elected.

He was at first against defining war aims publicly, against committing a large expeditionary force to Vietnam, against a peace offensive, against committing his troops to offensive strategy of seeking out and destroying the enemy, and emphatically against risking a major ground war against superior numbers on the Asian continent—but he has done all these things in the face of sharp opposition within his own party and the nation.

This decisive Presidential power is best illustrated by his main argument for renewing the bombing in North Vietnam. His central argument was that the enemy was building up its

forces during the bombing pause, and that unless the bombing was renewed, "the cost in life—Vietnamese lives, American lives, and allied lives—will only be greatly increased."

In saying this, he made no reference to the much greater build-up of allied power during the pause, and implied that unless the United States renewed the bombing and stopped the flow of enemy arms, the balance of power would be changed in favor of the enemy, and the American command would be put in danger. On this basis, obviously nobody could challenge his thesis.

The facts before the Senate, however, do not support this proposition. The Vietcong, it is true, get most of their arms from Communist North Vietnam. They have gone over to a new weapons system that gets all its ammunition from China, and cannot be supplied by capturing supplies from the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces, whose ammunition does not fit their new weapons. But the Vietcong are fighting mainly with small arms, and can keep up the present level of fighting with no more than twelve tons of supplies a day.

The official line in Washington is that the Vietcong need 200 tons of supplies a day, which is a lot, and therefore that bombing them will cripple their operation. But 200 tons a day is an estimate based on the assumption that every Vietcong unit will be engaged all the time, and this never has happened in the Vietnamese war

and is not likely to happen in the foreseeable future.

Nevertheless, when this picture of North Vietnamese trucks delivering 200 tons of arms every day to attack our positions is presented as the factual situation, the opposition to President Johnson does not know what to say.

The President's legal argument is equally difficult. He says that the Congress authorized him to take any action "he," the President, deemed necessary, not only in South Vietnam but in all of Southeast Asia, to oppose the aggression of the Communists, and in this he is absolutely right.

But the President asked for this power in the midst of the crisis over the Communist attack on American ships in the Gulf of Tonkin last summer, when the Congress really had no choice but to give him whatever he requested publicly or repudiate him and thus help the enemy.

The President may be right in what he has requested and what he has done, but the constitutional point is perfectly clear. The system has changed dramatically in the last generation. The President is now able to get the legal authority he wants if he chooses the right time to ask for it publicly, and he is able then to exercise that power to bomb or not to bomb, to commit 100,000 men or 500,000 men to the battle to carry out his policies if he so chooses.

Even in the midst of this week's controversy between the President and the liberal Democratic Senators of his own party over whether to bomb or not to

bomb North Vietnam, the President's power was overwhelming.

He sought their "consent," but did not really seek their advice on the things he eventually did.

Once the decision was made, the power of the Presidency began to appear. General Eisenhower, not by accident, supported it publicly. John J. McCloy and Allen Dulles and the other elder statesmen were brought into the White House and gave their support.

The President went on television to announce the results, and went on again to repeat it for the Columbia Broadcasting system, because Walter Cronkite happened to be launching his news show on color that night, and that was not all.

Secretary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara, and White House Assistant McGeorge Bundy were all suddenly available to explain the reasons for the bombing to waves of reporters representing the big columns, agencies, papers and syndicates.

All of which is quite legal and even convenient. But it underscores the main point of all this. The balance of power has shifted in America to the Presidency. Wilson in Britain and even Kossygin in the Soviet Union never had such freedom of action in foreign affairs. Something important has happened in America since Woodrow Wilson went to his grave believing that the President of the United States was paralyzed in the foreign affairs field by the overwhelming power of the Congress and public opinion.